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Walking in a fairy tale forest in search of a second primitivity with the help of Little Red Riding Hood

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ABSTRACT

In our modern society, self-reflection is valued as an important tool to work on a positive and lasting self-identity and to find and define our own path in life. Self-reflection can be seen as the fruit of the scientific approach, which has taught us to divide reality into subject and object. The reflecting person looks at him- or herself as an object that can be observed and analysed in order to reach a conclusion. However, this division between human and nature, and between the person and him- or herself, can also be a source of alienation and depression, because it fractures a more primitive connection between the self and nature. The article documents a coaching workshop that seeks to restore, to an extent, the undivided self in unity with nature. To do so, it uses the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood, a story that stems from a time long before the rise of objective thinking and cognitive reasoning. It presents a method that combines the telling of the fairy tale, walking in a forest with old oaks, and talking about life events. Twelve participants, all career counsellors, take part. Their reflections demonstrate that through connecting the walk in nature with our absorption into the fairy tale, we are able to accomplish a state of *second primitivity* where cognitive control and reflective observation temporarily give way to sensitivity, vulnerability, and susceptibility to the symbolism that is linked to pre-reflexive experience. The interplay between the symbolism of the fairy tale, the lived story of the walking experience in the woods, and the mutual storytelling between the participants enhances the emergence of new insights and new (self-)acceptance.

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Introduction

To us, modern people inhabiting a world shaped by scientific thinking and technologically-informed action, it has become second nature to differentiate between subject and object, between the perceiver and the thing perceived, between the thinking individual and formulated thought. We have been taught to objectivise the world, to reason over its laws and regularities, and to use it in our pursuit of certain objectives (Dijksterhuis, 1961).

The natural sciences have provided a role model in this respect. This branch of science has, very successfully, implemented the scientific method of objectification by eliminating our influence, as perceiving subjects, as much as possible. This scientific mastery of reality has led to technology's comprehensive and ubiquitous impact on human life (DeWitt, 2010). The social sciences are treading the same path: the aspiration there is to master the knowledge of human behaviour in order to discover predictable dependencies and manipulatable, objective laws in order to regulate our own thoughts,

feelings, and actions. This way of thinking is not without consequences for the practice of professional coaching.

Alienation

This objectifying view of the world is ingrained in our minds to such an extent that, even when communicating with ourselves we are unable to observe ourselves unless from a distance. We have termed this *reflexivity*. The idea is widespread – and it's partly due to the coaching guild – that such positioning of the observer with regard to one's own self is essential for accomplishing self-regulation and self-navigation in dealing with emotional events and making correct choices in life (Goz & Barnes, 2013). We have learned to divide the self into an observing part and an observed part.

By objectifying our world, we divide reality into two halves: the one that knows, and the one that is known. Western thought has separated humans from nature, and by internalising these objectifying attitudes in dealing with our own selves, the very nature of the human mind itself has also been split. Using a paradox, we could say that, thanks to reflexive thinking, humans have become alienated from themselves, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argue in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The direct and natural connection with our inner feelings has become mediated by self-observation and self-reflection, which Hoffman (2016) states “has led to a consciousness that is fundamentally alienated through the genesis of consciousness itself.”

These philosophical deliberations are not only of theoretical importance. Korthagen and Vasalos (2010), for example, analyze 30 years' worth of developments concerning the concept of reflection in teacher education. They conclude that the dominant view of self-reflection in education posits a cognitive and rational approach to self-related questions. Students are taught to observe, to analyze, and to deduce in regard to their personal questions: that is, to handle them in an objectifying manner. The consequences of this way of thinking in the practice of coaching and education have become clear in evaluation studies. Boud and Walker (1998) showed that reflection in education often has the character of an obligation, performed by the students according to a given procedure that the students follow in an instrumental (i.e. not fully engaged) and rational way. Mittendorff (2010) underscores this conclusion with her finding that students often dislike reflection tasks and reflexive career conversations. Only more recently has the concept of self-reflection in education been broadened and has also become oriented on presence, feeling, and awareness, according to Korthagen and Vasalos (2010). However, other studies indicate that there still is a gap between this way of conceptualising reflection and the practice of teachers who have to coach their students (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2017).

More in general Lengelle, Luken, and Meijers (2016) maintain that self-reflection is not without danger. When reflection is unilaterally cognitive it can result in worrying and depressive thoughts. Kross (2009) also warns about alienating forms of self-reflection, reporting the results of a research programme on adaptive and maladaptive ways of reflection. All these authors state that self-reflection, in order to be adaptive and to enhance well-being, should not primarily be a kind of rational and instrumental thinking to control thoughts and feelings, but rather be a receptive and creative activity that requires a state of surrender to the stream of consciousness.

Primitive embeddedness

We learn from the cultural anthropology of non-western peoples that an objectifying and distancing attitude towards nature and towards ourselves is far from universal. In their depictions of the so-called primitive societies, anthropologists from the beginning of the twentieth century talk about *participation mystique*, as a mystical, pre-reflexive connectedness with nature and community (Levy-Bruhl, 1922/2015). They use this concept to describe a way of perceiving reality in which humans are an immediate and inseparable part of nature and, in their senses, real phenomena are completely merged with the experience of the symbolic and magic emanation of these phenomena. Thus, for instance, in the noise of the wind we hear the voices of ghosts, and ploughing up the field and

performing a fertility ritual are one and the same. By wearing a mask, a person evokes and embodies the spirit of that mask. Within *participation mystique*, providing a chain-of-causation explanation of things is unnecessary because their meaning is corporeal and their connection to all other things is mystical. Both humans and nature are part of both a supreme force and a sacred order; together they are subjected to them and united with them. Earth is our mother, for we originate from it, are part of it, and share its fate.

By contrast, in our modern, scientific world, we have won a technological mastering of our lives to a high degree, but at the same time in this struggle we have lost a deep sense of meaningful embeddedness within life itself (Wulff, 1996). In our search for meaning in life, the pre-reflexive connectedness with the whole is broken. Life itself has become a project in which we have to make personal sense where before that sense was “given” through culture stories and archetypal meaning-making. Nevertheless, in our modern world, nature is still important to help us to construct a positive and lasting self-identity and a sense of well-being (Olivos & Clayton, 2016). Windhorst (2016) describes the discovery of this relationship as a process of remembering the ecological self. In this article we will work on a guiding method we can use to restore, to some extent, our primitive connection with nature, and which can help us to experience the connection between self and nature as filled with pre-reflexive meanings on the one hand without loss of our self-conscious thinking on the other.

Symbolic narratives

In the world of fairy tales and ancient myths, we sense the echo of that life in an undivided reality where inner feeling and external world were one, and where the actual manifestations of things was not yet separated from their symbolic meanings (Du Toit, 2016; Welman, 2001). In fairy tales and myths, animals can speak because, emotionally, they possess the power to be messages, and objects and characters may transform themselves because they change in our conception of the world. When reality and perception are the same, the sensation of things shifts the moment that they take a different shape – and vice versa – reality changes depending on the alteration of our own moods.

Erich Fromm (1951) examines dreams, fairy tales and myths as a universal language in which, in accordance with the laws of intensity of perception and of association (and contrary to the laws of logic and causality), things transfer their meaning to the surrounding world – through sensory perception that causes bodily association. If we should once again begin to understand the language of symbolism in fairy tales and myths, this, according to Fromm, would bring us to “the deepest sources of worldly wisdom”, and in learning from them, we would touch “the depths of our personality” (p. 17).

Extending the idea of *participation mystique*, telling and listening to fairy tales grants us access to the sensation that we are one with ourselves and with the surrounding world. Allowing ourselves to be guided by the associative power of symbolism – where shapes transform, meanings merge, and the personality of the listener is identified with the characters of the narrative – it is possible to explore our moral space and to regain knowledge of the world and of ourselves from the depths of our spiritual mind (Bolton, 2016).

We can establish a deeper connection between ourselves and life if we abandon the position of observers, rid ourselves of reflexivity and the empiricism of the autonomous, thinking subject, and surrender ourselves to the momentary sensation, unite with the world we inhabit, and absorb all impressions it imprints in our senses and all associations and meanings it awakens (Bolton, 2016). The path of rationality and of reflexivity may take us to logical conclusions and explanations, but that does not yet equal comprehension from within or the experience of meaningful insight. These are not the fruit of logical thought and cognitive reflexivity, they are gifts of mind; they yield themselves not to analysis and arguing – we can only surrender ourselves to them (De Ronde, 2015).

Second primitivity

To us, people of the modern world, it is impossible to begin living as ancient peoples did. Thinking in terms of cause and effect, reflexivity and deduction, analysis and expedience, has conquered us irrevocably. We can no longer rid ourselves of these. This article is, by itself, an example of the empirical approach to the question of empathetic knowing and connectedness between our spirituality and the surrounding world. All of this, however, does not necessarily mean that we are completely unsusceptible to the influence of things as defined by *participation mystique*.

Studying the nature of the creative artist, Erik Erikson (1977) speaks about “regression in service of the ego”: supervised by the stern look of the reality principle, this same reality principle is abandoned for a moment. Han Fortmann (1974) introduces the concept of “second primitivity” to designate that also modern humans are capable of opening up their consciousness to the meaning of the world in the present moment here and now – in the form of a lived experience that precedes the intrinsic act of reflexivity. “Critical distance ought to give way to a restored proximity from time to time”, he writes. “Criticism corrects empathy (participation), and empathy corrects criticism” (p. 557).

In *Phenomenology of Practice*, Max van Manen (2014) calls for a study of lived experiences. The aspiration to such a study is paradoxical because a lived experience is something that we can experience but cannot completely grasp if we should try to study it. Having hardly begun to talk about it, it has already slipped away, transforming itself from an experienced tale to a told experience, from a lived story to a told story (Stern, 2004). Like Fortmann, Van Manen makes an essential connection to modern natural sciences, where it is now accepted to regard reality to possess two (or more) manifestations that are mutually exclusive: like particle and wave, matter and energy. Both manifestations are real but cannot be harmoniously nested together within the same framework at the same time. In a similar way, lived experience and conscious reflection are incompatible in the same moment, but both are nevertheless real, existing positions of the human mind.

The narrative approach of the dialogical self theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Vassiliev, 2016) provides a conceptual framework that helps us understand these different positions as the alternating perspectives of the teller and/or listener on the one hand, and of the inhabiting character of the tale on the other. In one moment, we are part of the story and in the other, we are its teller or listener. The theory of the dialogical self, in which the self is conceptualised as a multivocal whole of I-positions, can help us to permit and to understand the pre-modern experience of the participation mystique as a certain I-position within the dialogical space of the self. This way, again paradoxically, the experience of *wholeness* can become *part* of our life.

Walking in a fairy tale as a work approach

In coaching practice, much attention is paid to the mutual influence of the two manifestations of reality in the human mind. As coaches, we try to invoke lived experiences within the people turning to us, and we try to let them into themselves, accept themselves, as well as grasp their own message while looking at themselves from a distance and thinking about themselves. In this article, I develop and present an approach that explores the combination of the sensation of participation mystique with the ability to reflexively find one’s own path of life. In this exercise, a narrative space is created (Breuer, 2008). During an actual walk in the wood, the participants listen to the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale and, from time to time, together with a partner and led by the plot of the fairy tale, they exchange thoughts and memories of experiences from their personal past or current emotions. In the pages that follow, I will describe how this workshop progresses and will briefly present the reactions of the participants. I shall conclude with a concise review of the psychological meaning of fairy tales and the idea of participation mystique within it.

Participants

The starting point of the development of this workshop was an encounter with a colleague. I told her about my ideas of combining storytelling and taking a walk in the woods. Spontaneously, she proposed to bring together a group of interested career counsellors working in educational settings by sending out a call to their professional network. Thirteen women responded and twelve of them actually participated. We agreed that they would take part in my workshop and, afterwards, they would provide me with their experience-based feedback.

Within the fairy tale forest of little red riding hood

The workshop begins in a restaurant near the woods where the participants and the workshop leader have agreed to meet. Here, I tell them about the plan for the forthcoming walk in the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale. It includes several stages: going to the wood; four stages inside the wood; returning to the place of our first meeting. We shall walk in a group and within this group each member will have one permanent partner; at each stage I shall tell a part of the fairy tale that will invariably end in a question that is relevant to participants, and which will form the topic of their conversation.

I continue explaining while walking out of the restaurant. I invite the participants to choose a buddy and, on their way to the wood, tell each other how they have grown up with fairy tales and stories, in order to become acquainted with each other. "Little Red Riding Hood is a fairy tale for mothers, daughters, and grandmothers", I explain. "Perhaps you can share with each other how you've grown up with fairy tales and stories, and also how you've raised your children with fairy tales, how you told and read stories to them, and to what talks these stories led" (cf. Lykke, 1993). I look at the group: a brief moment of silence and concentration ensues. Then I say: "Well, off we go!" And the group is on the move.

The forms of work in which a narrative space is applied require a correct introduction. The participants need to be gradually introduced to the fairy tale atmosphere (De Ronde, 2015). The pairs are given the chance to become acquainted with each other and create a feeling of mutuality. By referring to the intergenerational perspective, I introduce the idea of the path of life, of origin, and of continuity. The initial stage of getting to the wood is intended to create an atmosphere of trust. We are still not inside the fairy tale but we are getting closer to it.

Stage one: the mother's errand

After some fifteen minutes we have reached an old oak wood. I summon the group, raise my index finger knowingly, lower my voice, and start speaking:

Here, at the fringe of the wood, our fairy tale begins ... Once upon a time, long ago, at the end of a great forest with tall trees, a girl lived in a tiny house. Everybody loved her very much, for she was lively and jolly. Her grandmother, who lived further in the wood, had knit a red hood for her and that is why everyone called the girl Little Red Riding Hood. One day, early in the morning, her mother called her. "Come, Little Red Riding Hood. I learnt that your grandmother is sick. Go to her and bring her this basket with cake and wine. But do not leave the path or you might lose your way, and you might meet the Wolf!" Little Red Riding Hood took a firm hold of the basket and went on her way.

After this first excerpt, I invite the participants to share with each other how they have entered the world beyond their parents' homes, and to tell each other what was, symbolically, in the basket they received from their parents, and what errands and what warnings accompanied them from their homes along the paths of their lives. From a methodical point of view, I consciously touch upon several motives. I emphasise the contrast between the big woods and the little girl. I interpret the fringe of the woods as a metaphor of the transition between childhood and adulthood.

Using my voice, gestures, and facial expressions, I do two things. First, I tell the fairy tale evocatively. I conjure up the fairy tale world and the feeling of mysticism, lowering my voice to a

whisper, playing with the effect of silence and quietness: in this way, I create expectation in the participants. Second, my voice is restored to a normal timbre and I then invite the group to pair up and continue their conversations, answering my questions about the basket and the errands.

Stage two: flowers in the wood

We walk among the tall trees. I overhear snatches of conversation, but I try not to watch them; I can feel that they are quite lively, though. After twenty minutes, we stop again. In one larger clearing, the group gathers around me: the pairs now turn into the circle for a while. The fairy tale continues.

Little Red Riding Hood is walking through the woods happily and joyfully. The sun's rays are shining through the branches, the sky is blue, and birds are singing. How pretty is the forest! What lovely flowers grow beside the path! Oh, what a beautiful flower! I shall pick it for Granny! Oh, there's one more over there ... and another! Without knowing, Little Red Riding Hood is carried away, picking the most alluring flowers. And over there, ah, farther down, are even more beautiful flowers! And how sweet they smell! Attracted by these pretty flowers, she picks a large bouquet.

Here I interrupt the fairy tale and, returning to my normal tone, I turn to the participants, enjoining them to

Continue the story from where you stopped before, and gradually progress to the question of the flowers you have encountered in your life. What beautiful things have happened on the path of your life? Which of these flowers did you pick and which did you perhaps overlook?

I am silent for a few seconds, then urge them: "And on we go!"

Stage three: the wolf

The pairs start deep conversations and spread out even more, separating from the other pairs. The occasional phrases I hear suggest that cherished memories are being shared. After some twenty minutes, we stop again. We wait until everyone is gathered around me. I take a look at the group, let the silence create expectation, and continue telling the story.

Suddenly, Little Red Riding Hood raised her eyes. It looks like it's getting dark. Clouds have covered the sun. Little Red Riding Hood is startled when she remembers she was actually headed for her Granny's and that it's high time she continued down her path. She looks around and is seized with fear. Where did the path go? And in that very moment, behind a tree, the Wolf appears. "Are you looking for something, little girl? Are you lost perhaps?" Little Red Riding Hood is frightened, but responds bravely, saying, Yes, I am going to my Granny's, but I've lost the path. She lives yonder, in a small house, and she is sick. When I arrive, she always says, "Just press the latch and the door will open." "Right, so ...", says the Wolf. "Yeah, I can help you, little girl, because I see you've really strayed from the path ..."

Here I interrupt my story again and look at the participants. "Sometimes", I explain, "We have the feeling we are wandering in life and we doubt we're on the right path. Sometimes we connect with people without being sure it's wise. Continue your story from where you stopped earlier, and tell your partner about what you've searched for along the path of your life, and perhaps also about the wanderings in some of your undertakings."

Stage four: at granny's

The third stage of the workshop I make shorter than the previous ones, because the fourth stage is a direct extension of the third. After ten minutes I once again summon the group around me.

You know how the fairy tale goes: the Wolf pointed Little Red Riding Hood to a roundabout path to her Granny's house and she, cheerful and happy, hurried along. The Wolf, however, took the shorter path through the woods and it was not long before he got to the door of the house. He knocked and heard Granny's voice from within. "Just press the latch and the door will open." The Wolf did not hesitate, rushed into the room and devoured the Grandmother. He then put on her nightcap and slid under the duvet. Not long after, Little Red Riding Hood

knocked on the door. "Just press the latch and the door will open," a hoary voice was heard from the inside. Gasping for her breath because she had been running, Little Red Riding Hood was astonished when she saw her Grandmother in bed. "Oh, Grandmother, what big eyes you have!" Said she. "All the better to see you with." The strange voice replied. "Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have!" The little girl exclaimed. "All the better to hear you with." "Oh, Grandmother, what a big teeth you have!" "All the better to eat you with!" – the wolf jumped from the bed, dove onto Little Red Riding Hood, and swallowed her.

Again I switch from the tale to the reasoning.

Sometimes in life situations arise that overwhelm us, that, as it were, swallow us up, and sweep us over like a giant wave. "You", I pause then continue, "Talk with each other about your experiences along your path of life. Continue your conversation and consider if you might also dwell on any such moments".

As the leader of this workshop, I am aware that my question will touch upon some raw spots. It is important that the participants feel invited to such intimacy, yet at the same time, are free to decide how much of their souls to lay bare. "What do I share and what do I keep silent about?" It is in this respect that reciprocity plays a vital part: the confidence one partner inspires in the other generates the propensity in that other to also be discreet. Each pair has built their own type and extent of familiarity.

Stage five: freed by the hunter

Meanwhile, an hour and a half has passed since we began our walk. Innermost secrets and existential questions have been shared. I take a look around so I can pick a suitable spot for the finale of the fairy tale. The wood co-operates, and we find ourselves very close to a hut with an imposing old tree next to it. The pairs, who have long been moving at a great distance from one another, gather in a circle once again, and I start speaking in a loud voice.

The fairy tale continues. You all know how it ends. The Wolf climbed back into bed with a heavy belly, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly. He was snoring so loudly that the Huntsman, who was passing by, heard him and immediately realised that something was not right in Granny's house. "I should check out this strange thing", he said, and walked in. Seeing the fat wolf sleeping in the bed, he wasted not a moment, but cut open the Wolf's belly. Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother jumped out, sound and well, and gave the Huntsman a happy hug for saving them. The Huntsman filled the Wolf's belly with stones and sewed it up. When he awoke, the Wolf was so thirsty that he jogged on to the well. He leaned down to drink but the heavy stones inside his belly dragged him down, he fell into the water, and forever disappeared on the bottom of the well. The Huntsman saw Little Red Riding Hood off to her home, and she would remember her adventure long afterward.

I step aside to emphasise the transition from narrator to instructor.

In the fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother are released by the Huntsman, and the Wolf disappears at the bottom of the well. Tell each other how the things you have just shared between yourselves have fallen into their places in your life, how you've "ordered" them in it. Just like the basket at the start of the path, so are the flowers and the Wolf metaphors of the things you have been given, or that you have encountered along your path, and similarly perhaps the Huntsman-liberator and the well also have their symbolic places in your life. Share what you feel like sharing with your partner.

Finally, I tell them this is the last stage of the walk with the pairs grouped as they are. "Shortly, we will reach the fringe of the wood again, and then I will ask you to thank your partner for whatever they have shared, and then walk the rest of the path to the restaurant together with another participant. Agreed?" I ask rhetorically. "Let's go!"

The way back: the end of the fairy tale

Eventually we reach the spot where the fairy tale began. The circle of the story is now closing. The meeting of the partners who have shared intimate experiences from their childhood and adolescent years is now over, and the transition to the ordinary world must be made. To finalise with a ritual, I recite a poem by the Dutch poet Neeltje Maria Min to the group, which, in only a few words, explores the relationship between daughter, mother, and grandmother. In a short ceremony, I then invite the

participants to thank each other for their candour and trust. This moment of closing the personal encounter is important. The workshop is not yet over, but the intimate sharing has ended now. Therefore I ask them to look for a different partner to share, in a more methodological way, their impressions from the workshop: its emotional value for them and its impact on them. This last part of the wandering has two functions. On the one hand, it helps to release and leave the intense emotional atmosphere and on the other it contributes to comprehension of how the method works. The task thus assigned, we all advance towards the restaurant where we began our trip.

Impressions

A few weeks after the workshop, the participants send me their reflections, I asked for by an e-mail message. The feeling of integrity and unity discussed earlier is felt in these responses. The participants describe the act of abandonment of objective thinking and indulging in the momentary lived experience as follows:

- It was as if something dragged me with enormous power back to my childhood. I could hear my mother's voice.
- Walking there was like getting closer to one's own self. I've now grasped the meaning of the messages my parents had been sending me off with back then.
- The fairy tale stirred my imagination. Letting my thoughts take their own course, literally walking inside the fairy tale, the wood as a metaphor of life, the flowers along the path – all of this has moved me deeply.
- The symbolism of the wood, the fairy tale in general, elevates you to a higher level of sensitivity.
- You follow the fairy tale and, without having to think, you stumble upon all sorts of curious things. And everything around us – the wood, the air, and weather – played in tune with the context.
- In some miraculous way, it turns out that you are comfortable talking about things that difficult and delicate ...
- It was a demonstration of strength for me to go deeper and deeper into my own life. The Little Red Riding Hood tale is a popular one and this is why I could feel, my curiosity and eagerness growing, the arrival of each new motif. This could be the reason why the questions seemed natural to me, rather than embarrassing.

The participants' impressions of the workshop show that the components of the workshop: walking in the woods, listening to the fairy tale, and sharing with each other, all intensified the effect of their impact. It seems that something like participation mystique has transpired: the personal past, the fairy tale symbolism, and the natural surroundings of the wood have united in a harmonious whole, formed a stable combination, created a pattern (Gestalt), and this wholeness is something more than the sum of its parts.

What the participants share about their conversations also substantiates the emotional value of the workshop. They touched upon personal and intimate moments, which is evident from the following responses:

- "To me the flower picking motif stood as a symbol of my resistance – to stray from the right path so I can have a taste of freedom."
- "The fairy tale is a metaphor of the great big world, of my own entry in life when I was 18. The woods are not simply enticing, they are big and often impenetrable, you could get lost in no time. The flowers reminded me of the temptations of excessive freedom – it was hard to deal with them and that is why I wandered in my relationships with people, with men in particular."
- "The fairy tale made me recall many sad moments of my life. Without going into detail, this was a period of my life when I was really at a loss, when I had actually lost myself. A time when I did not know who I was, what I wanted, and which way I wanted to go."

- “The fairy tale made me realise that there are quite a few wolves in my life, and it looks like it is I who’s been attracting them. Perhaps (to use another metaphor) I promise some of them an abundance of food ...”
- “To me the most important insight was found at the end of the fairy tale. I realised that everything that had happened to me I could just throw away like stones in the well. Old heartaches, but at least my soul will be tidy.”

Finally, many participants point out that reciprocity in the confidential conversations was an extremely important aspect of the workshop:

- “What I enjoyed was that we were talking in pairs – and this helped me get ‘deep’ into it.
- Thanks to others also sharing intimate things, I was able to bear my own pain more easily. It is a sort of consolation to feel that both of you are equally vulnerable.”

Playing in the narrative space

“Man (...) is only completely a man when he plays,” writes Friedrich Schiller (1795/2016), pondering over the tension between prudence and spontaneity in man. It is only in the area of play that these two unite and humans are capable of harmoniously combining the moral (guided by rules and norms) with the spontaneous, the free, the sensual within themselves. In a similar manner objective, reflexive thinking is, on the face of it, opposed to lived experience. Owing to this unconventional approach of walking in the fairy tale forest, we seem to have found a way to get the momentary lived experience and the reflexive insight of reasoning into proximity. The lived story, the wandering with each other in the wood, and the stories they share are both constantly enriched and deepened.

The aforementioned excerpts of participant reactions illustrate the interplay of the fairy tale narrative and the participants’ narratives. Characters and metaphors have their own significance in the fairy tale, they also have their equivalents in the participants’ lives. What’s more, the fairy tale characters and metaphors assume a “flesh” as they are “filled” by the personal story of each participant. The personal story adds depth to the fairy tale story; the story of the fairy tale, on the other hand, helps reconsider and give new meaning to the personal story (Echols, Gravenstine, & Mobley, 2010; Parkin, 2010).

The conversations between partners are characterised by mutuality, not only with respect to the sharing of intimate things but also with respect to listening and hearing what the other person has to share (Cf. Coplan, 2004). A constant process of shifting from the present to the past and back is observed. The fairy tale recalls childhood and adolescent memories that we are talking about in the present moment. This is due to the evocative nature of the fairy tale: it is both past, as an old, well-known story, and present, as a story told at this very moment. The setting – the woods as the venue of both the fairy tale and the workshop – contributes greatly to achieving this effect. Although the fairy tale begins with the invariable “Once upon a time”, its plot unfolds in the here and now.

What is interesting is the play between light and darkness in the fairy tale and in the feelings it stirs, between the effort to face painful memories from the past and the courage to accept our own life lessons learned from past suffering. For example, a number of the participants told about the tension between the feelings of closeness and intimacy of their parental homes and at the same time the necessity and inevitability of relieving themselves of those feelings. Another instance of the interplay between light and darkness, or good and evil, is the enjoyment of the beauty and pleasure the flowers offer, which gradually transforms into threat and confusion, and thus becomes the image of the Wolf. Conversely, the heaviness and darkness that the Wolf embodies also turn out to be the things we cannot do without along the path of our lives: the things that help us mature and grow, gain our own freedom and build our own independence (Cf. Kast, 1987).

The venue of the walk as a kind of playing, the meeting of the participants and the fairy tale itself, turn out to be a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971), that area of transition that phenomenologists see

as the birth of a new sense of meaning and a renewed relationship of belonging to the lives we live. It is in this transitional space that our moods are filled with experiences from outside and at the same time that the outside world is meaningfully loaded with our thoughts and feelings. The fairy tale, as it is told, is interpreted in the context of our life experiences. Conversely the story of our life is re-told in a new way by that comprehension. It is the transitional space of the walked narrative in which new insights are born and a new sense of meaning is embraced.

Conclusion

In our modern society, the construction of a positive and lasting self-identity is one of the most important personal challenges (Taylor, 1989). Self-reflection is widely regarded as an important tool to find our way and to define ourselves in an uncertain and precarious world and to give meaning to our lives. At the same time, this self-reflection can also be a source of alienation when it is comprehended and practised in an overly cognitive way.

Being the children of the Enlightenment, we have learned to objectify the world and to think about ourselves. As a consequence, we are incapable of being one with nature in the way our ancestors once were. Those very same ancestors have, however, bequeathed to us, in their fairy tales and myths, an immense treasure trove of symbolism that speaks to us in the language of sensory images, of metaphors borrowed from nature, of fantasies filled with sensitivity. These can help us to reach beyond an unduly rational approach to life's questions.

Searching for the path in the fairy tale forest as a working method demonstrates that, in connecting the walk in nature and becoming absorbed into the fairy tale, we still manage to enter a state of *second primitivity*, where cognitive control and reflexive observation temporarily give way to sensitivity, vulnerability, and the susceptibility to symbolism that is linked to pre-reflexive experience. In the interplay between symbolism and the personal story, between identifying with the fairy tale and formulating one's own experiences, between the search for the path in the woods and the search for the correct destination in our own lives, the *narrative space* emerges in which new insights appear, we experience a new acceptance, and we find a new inner balance.

Of course, many questions can be asked. How sustainable is the self-acceptance that emerges? What is the depth of our new insights? Can we generalise from this example, in which we walked with counsellor colleagues, to our work with other clients? Are these career counsellors able to transfer these experiences to their own practices in educational settings? Much research is needed if we want to design an evidence-based method. In this article, my sole intention was to present an exploration of a creative and inviting method to stimulate the interplay between lived stories and the told stories of people with whom we work. The method described can be seen as an endeavour to use reflexive thinking while at the same time overcoming objectifying reflexivity in our search for meaning in life.

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